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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 NOUAKCHOTT 000240

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: ROUND UP OF CURRENT EUROPEAN DIPLOMATIC VIEWS ON
MAURITANIA

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Dennis Hankins for reason 1.4 (b and d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Marked differences exist between the French, Germans, Spanish and European Commission in Nouakchott. The EC sees the Europeans poised to join the American hard-line against the coup with the release of its Article 96 conclusions o/a April 6 (but at a lamentable cost for the Mauritanian people). The French see an extended period of political and economic limbo under a short-sighted Aziz regime that increasingly causes concern. The Spaniards warn that things could be worse than Aziz and note their main security concern -- illegal migration -- is well under control. The Germans seem to believe that Aziz can still win credibility if he can get enough people out to vote on June 16.

France -- The situation is confused

¶2. (C) Charge met March 31 with French Charge Marc Flattot in the wake of the flap over President Sarkozy's statement that there was no opposition to the August 6 coup. Flattot (protect) was obviously having a bad week and said there seemed to be radio silence from Paris since he was getting no guidance on how to handle his president's remarks -- even as all of Mauritania's elite are calling to either praise or condemn the French. Flattot said that Sarkozy's statement was obviously wrong and probably made without much thought. Unfortunately, Sarkozy's remark, as well as Foreign Minister Kouchner's Jeune Afrique quote suggesting President Abdallahi should return only to administer the June 6 elections being organized by General Aziz, had taken on far greater significance in Nouakchott than what the French leaders had intended. Flattot recognized that anti-coup rallies being organized by Ahmed Ould Daddah's party on April 1 and by the FNDD on April 2 were "Sarkozy Protests" meant to underline that there is real resistance. Flattot noted that French Ambassador Vanderpoorter (who has been away for over a month due to a detached retina) was livid over anti-coup statements that Sarkozy must have been ill-advised by his Ambassador to say what he said.

¶3. (C) Flattot assumed that Aziz will go forward with his election program lamenting the process will leave him and the country no better off than it is now. He recognized that under the current circumstances there is no chance of a

credible election. While he assumes Aziz will be able to rustle up opponents from the dissident branches of Ould Daddah's RFD and Abdallahi's ADIL parties, he did not expect Ould Daddah to run except under the very doubtful circumstance where Vall also decided to run. Flattot worried that Aziz would have a tenuous position at best as resources dry up -- suggesting Mauritania will be bankrupt by October. Flattot doubted Arab cash flows would be sufficient to offset Western assistance.

¶4. (C) Flattot saw Aziz' outreach to the Iranians as indicative of his poor policy skills. While being able to gain some modicum of international recognition and much needed cash injections by playing with the Iranians, Flattot saw that Aziz had both upset his regionally powerful neighbors in Rabat and, perhaps more importantly, was undermining his own military support base by angering the anti-Shiite Bathist core of the military hierarchy. Flattot saw this as typical of Aziz who, "takes actions quickly for the immediate situation but doesn't think through the consequences."

¶5. (C) While increasingly critical of what type of leader Aziz is proving to be, Flattot doubted the ability of the opposition to do anything about it. He saw the FNDD and RFD foolishly allowing themselves to be divided over a personal animosity between Abdallahi and Ould Daddah.

Spain -- It Could Be Worse

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¶6. (C) Charge met April 2 with Spanish Ambassador Alejandro Polanco Mata who, as always, was frank in citing Spanish security concerns as driving their policies. Polanco noted that Spain was very pleased with the Aziz regime's efforts in controlling illegal immigration to the Canary Islands. Now is the period of ideal conditions for boat people sailing from Nouadhibou to the Canaries. Last year in February and March, 23 boats made it to the Canaries. With Aziz getting out the word to stop the flow, this year there were only 2 boats. Asked about Mauritanian military involvement in drug trafficking that also affects Spanish security, Polanco responded that he knew the rumors but that, frankly, the drugs issue was less of a priority than alien smuggling. He also emphasized that he had no way of assessing the validity of the rumored military involvement in trafficking or even of evaluating how serious that traffic is. He did note he saw an increasing number of resident Latin Americans who have no obvious reason for being here.

¶7. (C) Polanco was curious whether there was likely to be any change in U.S. position after the June 6 elections. Charge responded that we had already made clear our opposition to the unilateral election initiative that offered no chance of resulting in a credible process. Assuming Aziz sticks to his plan, Charge said we will dismiss it as a waste of time and money that does nothing to alter his (non)legitimacy. Polanco accepted the U.S. position but worried that it will result in a long-term stalemate that will make Mauritania effectively a "non-country."

¶8. (C) When asked about Aziz' overtures to Iran, Polanco responded, "sadly, I have to say that is primarily the result of the American and European Commission positions." Polanco argued that Aziz had ardently hoped for an eventual softening of U.S. opposition given his decades of counter-terrorism cooperation with the West. When that change was not forthcoming, Aziz was "forced" to reach out to Iran both for short-term money and recognition and as a political signal to the U.S. and Europeans that he has other options if aid is cut off. Polanco acknowledged that the Iranian gambit caused Aziz problems with Morocco, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and his own military base but termed the Iranian initiative as mainly

"theater." He did question whether Aziz is capable of managing the Iranian relationship once he starts it.

¶9. (C) Polanco voiced concern about civil unrest in the months leading up to the June elections starting with the anti-coup march scheduled for today (April 2). While saw the call to "take to the streets" is an unfortunate reaction to Sarkozy's dismissal of the opposition to the coup, but worried that the FNDD was not sophisticated enough to manage their supporters to avoid violence. Polanco was particularly concerned by the rhetoric being used by President of the National Assembly Messaoud Ould Boulkheir which ran the risk of inciting violence on ethnic lines. He hoped the international community would urge the FNDD not to prevent people from voting on June 6.

¶10. (C) Charge and Polanco discussed how vulnerable Aziz will be between the time he resigns (April 18) and the June 6 elections. Polanco agreed that, "if anyone wants to move against him, that's the time." That said, he did not believe anyone in the military -- even those who dislike Aziz -- will run the risk of turning on Aziz and potentially unleashing tremendous instability. If anyone acts against him, Polanco assumed it would be from the business community that is seeing less revenue in a quickly shrinking economy and is worried by Aziz' anti-corruption efforts Polanco acknowledged Aziz' anti-corruption efforts are targeted on his political enemies and shelter his friends but added, "you have to start somewhere. Polanco argued, "One thing the FNDD hasn't figured out is that there are far worse than Aziz," suggesting that any military counter-coup would likely be by more extreme elements who would make no effort to gain democratic legitimacy and would likely handle dissent with a gun.

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Germany -- Aziz can still gain legitimacy

¶11. (C) Charge met with German Ambassador Eberhard Schanze on April 1. Schanze was more cautious than normal in his conversation, no doubt aware of previous U.S. concerns about his outspoken pro-coup positions. Still, he managed to project the most supportive view of the regime of the three European missions.

¶12. (C) Schanze spoke of the June 6 electoral process in a technical manner avoiding reference to its legitimacy. Despite the public dismissal of the unilateral process by the European Commission, the African Union, and the U.S., Schanze believes Aziz will be satisfied with Arab recognition confident that, eventually, the rest of the international community will come around. "If he can get a good sized turnout and get a strong majority," Schanze argued Aziz will have the foundation of a legitimacy argument. Schanze tended to dismiss the ability of the RFD and FNDD to muster much public opposition to the coup. Concerning the European Commission's Article 96 process (Schanze represents the Czech European Union Presidency as part of a rotation system between the three European embassies), Schanze repeated veiled criticism of EC Commissioner Louis Michel who he saw as personally responsible for the harsh line taken by the Commission in response to the coup. Schanze welcomed the idea of Louis Michel going back to Belgian politics offering the chance for a new (and presumably better) Commissioner.

¶13. (C) Schanze lamented the expulsion of the Israeli Ambassador and the specter of enhanced relations with Iran, but added carefully, "One could argue Aziz did both of these things because the U.S. gave him no option." The German Ambassador said he was not particularly concerned about the Iranians, "Aziz is using them now because he needs him. If he gets legitimacy, he won't need them any more."

European Commission -- In a week we'll be with you, sadly.

¶14. (C) European Commission Charge Geza Strammer told Charge April 1 he expected that the conclusions of the Article 96 consultations would be released on or about April 6 putting the European Union, "on the same level as the U.S.," in condemnation of the coup. Strammer, who will have the dubious pleasure of briefing Aziz, said, "this is going to be the end of the process, there will be nothing else Aziz can do to get around sanctions." Strammer emphasized, "this is not something I'm happy about," because the European decision will stop hundreds of millions of Euros of development activity that has a direct impact on the Mauritanian people. Strammer noted the Mauritians -- primarily Aziz -- could have avoided this but made no serious effort at finding a consensual solution. Strammer, who has always sided with the U.S. in his frustration with the positions of the European member states present in Mauritania, said the Article 96 will leave the door open for future negotiation but only on the basis of a fundamentally different and consensual plan. He emphasized the declaration will even commit the EC to finance and fully monitor any elections coming out of a truly acceptable political dialogue.

¶15. (C) Strammer raised concerns about the security of his staff after the European decision comes down. Charge noted that despite the rough U.S. relations with the regime, they had not done anything yet to threaten our security. That said, some local staff have reported increased negative comments from White Moors for their affiliation with the Embassy (Strammer said his staff reported the same thing). Strammer was also concerned about social unrest as we go into the summer due to the combination of political tensions related to the June 6 elections, rising temperatures that will frequently knock out Nouakchott's power grid, and the possibility that the lack of hard currency will prevent importers from stocking food shelves -- leading to an urban food shortage.

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¶16. (C) Strammer was confident (or, at least tried to make a good show of it) that the European ambassadors would not stray from the unanimous European Union position once declared. "That will be the EUROPEAN common position," he stressed saying he assumed those who didn't fully personally embrace it, "will just stop talking." Strammer said that press reports alleging that the German Ambassador had criticized Louis Michel's leadership on Mauritania, "are completely false." Charge spared telling Strammer how Schanze had done just that 30 minutes earlier.

¶17. (C) Strammer lamented that the opposition allowed itself to be divided. Noting the planned RFD rally for April 1 and FNDD march for April 2, a bemoaned, "why couldn't they have done it together?" (In fact, the FNDD leadership ended up going to the RFD rally and RFD President Ahmed Ould Daddah urged his supporters to join the April 2 FNDD march). Strammer saw the opposition as spending too much energy worrying about the international community instead of trying to reach an internal political resolution.
HANKINS